

"What is the meaning of this!?" Ramsey's voice cracked through the silence.



The conference room burned with cold, relentless light, sharpening every glance and setting the room on edge. Ramsey stood at the table's center, his palms flat against the surface, his eyes flicking

between the faces before him—Leonis, tight-lipped and withdrawn, and Redford, leaning back with an infuriating smirk.

Redford tilted his head, his smirk curling wider. "I'd watch my tone if I were you," he said, the words slow and biting. "Thin ice, Ramsey. Very thin."

"Thin ice?" Ramsey's fists slammed onto the table, his voice rising. "I gave you everything! The documents, the proof. I put my life on the line—yesterday, I stopped this city from burning! And *this* is your answer?"

Leonis cleared his throat, his fingers steeped as if it could shield him from Ramsey's fury. "Ramsey," he said, his voice low and strained, "this isn't easy, but the board has decided. We can't afford to wait any longer."

"Wait?" Ramsey leaned closer, his words slicing. "We already *have* what we need! Proof, leverage—all of it. We can bring them in the right way. Why resort to this?"

Redford's laugh broke the moment, sharp and cruel. "The right way? That's adorable," he said, leaning forward with mock interest. "Tell me, Ramsey, what happens when the rest of the Heartlands realize their leaders are gone? Do you think they'll just—what? Throw a farewell party? You built them. You know how they work. Retaliation is guaranteed."

His grin turned cold, his voice dropping. "The only way to finish this is to wipe it out. Clean. Final. No survivors, no revenge. Efficient, don't you think?"

Ramsey turned back to Leonis, his voice breaking. "You can't agree with this," he said, desperation edging into his tone. "Not this."

Leonis's gaze fell for a fraction of a second before he straightened, his voice a dull echo of authority. "It doesn't matter what I believe. The board has already voted. By midnight, Davis will lead the assault. It's over, Ramsey."

"Over?" Ramsey took a step back, his breathing shallow. He stared at Leonis, then at Redford, his words barely above a whisper. "You don't have to do this. There's still time to stop it. To stop *this*."

Redford's chuckle came like a slap. "Oh, Ramsey," he said, his tone mockingly sweet. "You sound awfully sentimental. Maybe you've gone soft. Or maybe..." His grin turned sharper, his eyes glinting. "Maybe you've gone too deep. Too attached. Should we be worried? Maybe you're the liability now. What did they call you again? Oh, yes — 'The Boss.' Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"



Ramsey froze, Redford's words hanging in the air like smoke. Slowly, he straightened, his expression hardening into icy resolve.

"Do what you think is right," he said coldly, his voice like a blade.
"But I'll do what's necessary to end this without spilling any more blood."

He turned sharply, his coat brushing the table as he strode to the door. The slam as it closed behind him was a final, thunderous punctuation, leaving a tense silence in his wake. It was 21st of September, the final countdown begins.

The Vince Farmhouse

The Vince Farmhouse, once a sanctuary for the Heartlands, now felt like a tomb. The air hung heavy with despair, the faint creak of the old wooden beams echoing the weight in every man's chest. Scattered in huddled groups throughout the once-lively safehouse, the remaining men wore hollow expressions, their conversations low murmurs or bitter silences.

Every headline and police report that had come through in the last 48 hours told the same story: the Heartlands were finished. Every hideout, every operation, every lifeline—uprooted, exposed, dismantled. It wasn't just defeat; it was annihilation.

When the door creaked open, all heads turned toward it. Ramsey stepped inside, his silhouette framed by the dim, fading daylight. His presence still carried weight, but the light that once commanded respect—fear even—now flickered with something subdued.

The men stared at him, desperate for answers. A faint murmur began, uncertainty rolling through the room like a tide, but Ramsey

raised a hand, firm and silent. The murmurs stopped. The men quieted, though their unease lingered like a shadow.



Ramsey moved through the farmhouse without a word, his steps echoing against the polished wood of the grand hallway. He paused at the main hall, his eyes sweeping over the faded wallpaper, the chipped furniture, and the long-abandoned poker table at the center.

The ghosts of laughter echoed faintly in his mind—rowdy voices, drunken boasts, the clang of glasses meeting in triumphant toasts. It wasn't just a headquarters back then; it had been a home. A purpose. A place where those cast out by society—men with nowhere else to go—found belonging, however fractured it might have been.

"Look around, boys!" he had once said, standing where the poker table now sat under a blanket of dust. *"Every one of you—cast-offs, rejects, nobodies—look where you are now. We built this new place! Together!"* His voice had been full of fire back then, every word charged with conviction. He'd pounded his fist on the table, grinning as cheers erupted around him.

"And what do we do when the world spits in our face?" Ramsey had leaned in, his gaze locking onto the men around him.

"We spit back!" someone had roared, and Ramsey's grin had widened.

"That's right! We fight! We take! We survive because no one else will fight for us!" he'd declared, raising his glass high as his men followed suit. The cheers had been deafening.

But now? The silence was louder.

He drifted into the dining room, his hand trailing along the edge of the massive oak table that had once been the stage for raucous feasts. He could almost see the faces—smiling, triumphant, alive. Faces now missing, locked behind bars, or lying cold in morgues.

"You think anyone out there cares about you? About us? They'd rather see us starve. They'd rather see us dead," Ramsey had said once, pacing around the table as his men hung on his every word. His voice had lowered, becoming a growl, each syllable cutting

through the room. *"But here? Here, you're someone. Here, you matter."*

He paused by the head of the table, gripping the back of the chair as though he could still feel the echoes of the past.

"Boss, what if... it all falls apart?" someone had asked hesitantly that night, their voice uncertain, their eyes downcast.

Ramsey had stared them down, his response immediate and sharp. *"It won't. Not if we stick together. Not if we trust each other. That's how we win. That's how we survive."*

The mansion wasn't always just a refuge for criminals. It was a lifeline for the broken, the unwanted. Ramsey could hear the echo of his younger self, making promises to these men: *"Follow me, and you'll never be forgotten. We'll rise together. We'll have everything."*

He stopped in the parlor, where the faint smell of whiskey still lingered beneath the dust. He stood by the old gramophone, now silent, its horn dented but still defiant. This was where they used to celebrate victories—big and small. It didn't matter if it was stolen or earned; what mattered was the fleeting happiness it brought.



"No one takes care of their own like we do," Ramsey had told them, his arm slung around Hiram one night as the gramophone crackled out some jazz tune in the background. "That's why we'll outlast them all. Because this? This isn't just business. It's family."

But now? Now, the farmhouse felt haunted by their failure, each room a shrine to something lost.

Ramsey leaned against the wall, his gaze distant. He could feel the weight pressing on him harder than ever—the weight of promises broken, lives ruined, and the lingering question gnawing at his core: *Was it all worth it?*

The evening sun cast long shadows through the cracked and dusty windows of the Vance Farmhouse. Ramsey moved from room to room, his footsteps steady but his thoughts heavy. He knew what awaited them at midnight, but the words to prepare his men refused to form. For now, he needed to lift their spirits, even if only for a moment, and quietly summon them to a meeting in the main hall near the grand stairway.

The Kitchen

Ramsey stepped into the dimly lit kitchen, the smell of stale coffee and burnt toast lingering in the air. Three men sat at the table, their faces drawn and pale, while a fourth leaned against the counter, staring blankly out the window.

"What's this? A retirement club?" Ramsey asked, his voice cutting through the stillness.

The men looked up, startled, but said nothing.

"Let me tell you something." Ramsey pulled up a chair and leaned forward, his voice calm but firm. "I've seen you lot pull through worse than this. Remember that ambush on Trinity Street? Outnumbered, outgunned, but we walked out because you didn't flinch. Not then, and not now."

He stood, resting a hand on the shoulder of the man nearest to him. "We've been through hell and back. Keep that in mind. I need all of you in the main hall by 11. Near the stairs. Don't keep me waiting."

The men exchanged uncertain glances but nodded. As Ramsey left the room, the heaviness in the air seemed to lift just a fraction.

The Lounge

The lounge was dimly lit, its once-luxurious leather furniture now cracked and peeling. Four men along with Hiram were scattered around, their silence broken only by the clink of a glass as one poured himself another drink.

"Drinking away the day, are we?" Ramsey asked, stepping into the room.

Hiram holding the glass looked up, startled, before muttering, "What else is there to do, Boss?"

Ramsey walked over, grabbed the bottle from the table, and set it down with a sharp thud. "You could remember who the hell you are. All of you. The crew that ran the docks for years without anyone sniffing around. The crew that knew every damn shipment before it hit the ledger. And you Hiram? You are the genius."

He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a growl. "You've got sharp minds. Every one of you. Use them. I need you sharp tonight."

Straightening, Ramsey's gaze swept over the group. "Main hall, 11 p.m., near the stairs. Be there."

The men shifted in their seats, some nodding, some avoiding his eyes. Ramsey didn't wait for a response as he turned and walked out.



The Billiards Room

The sound of billiard balls cracking against each other greeted Ramsey as he entered. Four men stood around the table, their usual banter replaced by sullen silence. One leaned against the wall, chewing on a toothpick, his jaw tight.

"That's the saddest excuse for a game I've ever seen," Ramsey quipped, stepping inside.

One of the men glanced up, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Not exactly in the mood, Boss."

"You? Not in the mood?" Ramsey grabbed a cue and lined up a shot. The sharp crack of the balls breaking the triangle filled the room. "Remember when you cleared this table blindfolded? Had half the room betting against you, and you sank the black ball like it was nothing."

The smirk widened, spreading to the others.

"Luck had nothing to do with it," Ramsey said, setting the cue back. His tone softened but held its edge. "You're naturals, every one of you. I need that fire tonight."

He paused at the door, turning back to meet their eyes. "Main hall. Near the stairs. 11 sharp."

As he left, murmurs of conversation began to rise behind him.

The Armory

The armory was quiet except for the faint metallic click of weapons being cleaned and assembled. Four men were scattered around, their hands busy but their faces grim.

"Not bad," Ramsey said, stepping inside and surveying their work. "But I've seen you lot faster."

One of the men glanced up. "Just keeping the hands busy, Boss."

Ramsey crossed the room, resting a hand on the edge of a workbench as he grabs the nearby toothpick. "You're the best we've got when it comes to firepower. Every single one of you. Remember that warehouse job? No one stood a chance because you didn't miss."

The faintest of smiles flickered across one face, then another.



"I need that precision tonight. All of it," Ramsey said firmly. "Main hall. 11 p.m. Near the stairs."

The men nodded silently as Ramsey turned and left.

The Dormitory

The dormitory was cramped, a makeshift bunkhouse where four younger recruits sat on their bunks, heads bowed in quiet defeat. Ramsey clapped his hands sharply as he entered, the sound snapping them to attention.

"Listen up," he said, his voice filling the room. "You think this is it? That we're done? We're still here. Still standing. And that means something."

He pointed at one of them, a wiry young man barely old enough to shave. "You've got grit, kid. I've seen you hold your own against men twice your size."

He turned to another, a broad-shouldered recruit who straightened under his gaze. "And you? Sharpest mind in the crew. I need that tonight."

Ramsey stepped back, his eyes scanning the room. "Main hall. Near the stairs. 11 sharp. Don't be late."



The recruits exchanged hesitant glances before nodding.

Main Hall

By the time Ramsey returned to the main hall, the sun had long disappeared, leaving only shadows to stretch across the vast expanse of the room. The chandelier hung like a ghost in the ceiling's center, its crystals dull in the absence of light. He stood at the base of the grand staircase, his hand resting on the banister. With a flick of the switch, a golden glow flooded the room, chasing away the darkness but not the weight in his chest.



He sank onto the stairway, elbows on his knees, and head bowed. His fingers traced the ornate carvings on the railing absently, but his thoughts spiraled, dragging him back through the years.

1998

Ramsey's jaw clenched as the memory surfaced, vivid and sharp.

The assassination. He could almost hear the echo of the gunshot in his ears, feel the damp chill of the night when he cornered the former leader of the Heartlands. It had been masterful, a clean execution.

"You're the one who brought us out of the ashes," they had said.
"The only man who can lead us."

But what did they know? They saw a sharpshooter with perfect aim, a strategist who could outwit his enemies. What they didn't see was the man staring back at himself in the mirror, wondering if he'd just condemned himself to a life he wasn't ready for.

"Run a mob?" Ramsey scoffed under his breath, the echo of his own words mocking him from decades ago. *"I'm not a leader. I'm just a weapon."*

The memories of Leeds were the worst—the burning warehouses, the lifeless bodies. Zain's family. The others. He had been too green, too desperate to prove himself. And in his incompetence, he'd let blood flood the streets.

"That blood's on my hands," Ramsey thought bitterly, running a hand through his hair. *"And it always will be."*

2001

Zain. His mind lingered on the man with defiance burning in his eyes and a hatred for Heartlands that could have lit the city on fire.

"He hated us, hated me. But I needed that hate."

Ramsey had spent years training Zain, molding him, teaching him programming, martial arts—every skill the man could need to complete the mission Ramsey couldn't. He remembered late nights hunched over dimly lit screens, Zain's frustration spilling into curses as Ramsey calmly corrected his mistakes.

"You said you wanted a way out, didn't you? Then learn this."

And Zain had. Ramsey could see it now, the faint glimmer of pride he hadn't allowed himself to feel back then.

"He never knew, did he? Never knew I was building him for one purpose: to do what I couldn't. To recover those damn documents."

The irony wasn't lost on him. Zain, the boy who hated Heartlands, had been its savior in disguise.

2005

Ramsey's throat tightened as he thought about the day everything unraveled. Zain had done it—he had the documents in hand, a

triumph that should have been a turning point for Heartlands. But the mob wasn't kind to heroes, and they immediately found out.

"They would've killed him anyway," Ramsey tried to reason with himself, just as he had back then. "But it should've been anyone else. Anyone but me."

The memory played like a scene from a nightmare: the cold steel of the gun in his hand, the look of betrayal in Zain's eyes.

"You're Heartlands' leader. You can't let anyone believe you'd hesitate—not even for him."

Even now, that justification rang hollow. Ramsey closed his eyes, forcing the memory away.

"The documents were so close. I was so close."

But close wasn't good enough. And in failing, he hadn't just lost Zain—he'd lost himself.

It wasn't in the immediate aftermath of Zain's death that the clarity came. Those first few days were a blur of survival, of maintaining his image as the ruthless leader who wouldn't flinch, wouldn't falter. The mob watched him with hawk-like intensity, measuring every decision, every word.

"They couldn't see me break. Not then. Not ever."

But the nights were different. In the quiet hours, when the world was still and his mind refused to be, the cracks began to show. He replayed the events in his head—Zain's defiance, the spark of hope in his eyes as he thought he'd succeeded, the sharp betrayal when he realized the truth. Ramsey's hand shook as he lit cigarette after cigarette, but no amount of smoke could cloud the image of Zain's face in those final moments.

It was during one of those nights, staring out over Leeds from a safe house balcony, that the realization hit him.

"What the hell am I doing? What is any of this for?"

He thought about the bloodshed, the chaos, the endless cycle of violence that seemed to define the Heartlands. The mob had been a monster long before he took control, but instead of taming it, he'd fed it, let it grow until it consumed everything. Families torn apart. Lives destroyed.

"All to keep the Heartlands alive. But alive for what?"

His mind went back further—past Zain, past the assassinations, past the wars—to the people he'd met in the beginning. Men and women with nothing left, who joined the mob not out of ambition but desperation.

"We weren't a family, but we were something. A place to belong when the world didn't want us."

Somewhere along the way, that purpose had twisted into something darker. Heartlands had become a machine fueled by fear and blood, and Ramsey had become its engine. But what if it didn't have to be? What if he could take everything he'd learned, everything he'd suffered, and make something better?

"Black money, not blood money."

The words echoed in his head, a mantra that began to take shape. Heartlands could still be a refuge, a place for those who had nowhere else to go. But it didn't have to be built on bodies.

"We could build an empire—one that doesn't destroy the people it's supposed to protect."

He didn't have all the answers then, and he still didn't. But that night, Ramsey made a decision. Zain's death wouldn't be meaningless. It would be the line in the sand, the turning point that changed everything.

"I'll make this right," he'd sworn to himself, staring out over the city.
"I don't care what it takes. I'll make this right."

By the time Ramsey looked up, it was already about to be 11 p.m.



The house was quieter now, the oppressive stillness broken only by the faint creak of footsteps on the old wooden floors as the men began gathering. They moved as a collective shadow, shoulders hunched and heads low, carrying the weight of too many failures. Yet, when they finally looked at Ramsey, something changed. For

the first time in days, he saw it—a glimmer of hope, faint but undeniable, flickering in their eyes.

Ramsey took a step forward, standing at the base of the grand stairway. The dim light from the chandelier above caught the edges of his face, casting sharp angles of determination. His voice, calm yet commanding, cut through the air.



"Hello, everyone."

The men turned toward him, their silence speaking louder than words. Among them was Hiram, standing to the side, shoulders squared but his eyes betraying guilt. He looked at Ramsey, eager

and yet afraid, knowing the calamity that had fallen upon them was partly his doing.

Ramsey surveyed the room, taking in the worn faces and weary eyes. "By now, I'm sure every one of you knows the spot we're in. You've felt it. Seen it. Maybe even blamed yourselves for it."

A murmur swept through the crowd, and Hiram shifted uncomfortably, but Ramsey raised his hand to silence them.

"But let me be clear. It doesn't matter to me who did it or how it all happened. Because at this moment, the reasons and the mistakes mean nothing."

The room fell silent again, the weight of his words sinking in. Ramsey stepped forward, his gaze sweeping across the gathered men.

"We are in the worst place we have ever been. No money, no trust, no allies. And the enemies out there? They're circling like vultures, waiting for us to fall apart."

He paused, letting the weight of the truth settle. Then his tone shifted, rising with an edge of fire.

"But we're not done yet."

The men straightened slightly, their gazes sharpening as if drawn by an invisible force.

"I've been with most of you for years. I've seen you fight when the odds were against us, when everything told us to give up, but we didn't. You think this is new? This pressure, this fear? We've lived it. Breathed it. Thrived in it. And you know why?"

His voice boomed now, each word hitting like a hammer.

"Because we're stronger than this! We are more than a gang or a crew. We are a family, forged in fire and tempered in blood. Every one of you has a part in that—every one of you is here because you're the best at what you do."

Ramsey gestured toward the shadows where men still hung back, hesitant. "You think this is the end? I'll tell you what the end looks like. The end is when we stop fighting. When we stop believing in what we can do. And I refuse to let that happen while I'm still standing."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the crowd, a quiet energy building as Ramsey's words ignited something deep within them.

"We've been through hell together. And I know... I *know* some of you are ready to fight again. To claw our way out of this mess, to show them what we're made of." He paused, his gaze flicking to Hiram for a fraction of a second before addressing the room again.

"But sometimes..." Ramsey's voice softened, a somber note threading through his words. "...sometimes, fighting is not enough.

Sometimes, the strongest thing we can do is to face the truth, no matter how much it hurts."

Confusion rippled through the room, the fire in their eyes dimming slightly as they tried to understand.

"I won't lead you to a senseless slaughter. I won't let us fight a battle we cannot win. Tonight, I've made a choice. A hard one. The kind of choice a leader has to make." His voice faltered for the briefest of moments, but he pressed on.

"We surrender."

The silence that followed was deafening, the weight of his words crashing down like a wave.

Ramsey raised his hands, calming the rising whispers of disbelief. "Listen to me. Surrender doesn't mean defeat. It doesn't mean weakness. It means survival. And survival means another chance. A chance to rebuild. A chance to come back stronger. I'd rather see us live to fight another day than bury what's left of this family tonight."

Ramsey took a breath, his voice dropping to a low, steady hum. "This is my decision, and I'm asking you to trust me. Trust that I'm not giving up. Trust that I'm doing this for all of us."

He looked out at the faces before him, searching for their resolve. One by one, they nodded, some hesitantly, some with quiet

acceptance. Even Hiram, standing in the corner, gave a reluctant nod, his expression unreadable.

Ramsey's voice was calm, yet it carried the weight of a storm brewing beneath the surface. His words were heavy, sinking into the hearts of the men gathered before him.

"Tonight, just a few minutes later, the entire police force and Army will raid us with all their might," Ramsey said, his gaze steady, meeting each pair of weary eyes in the room. "They're looking to eradicate what's left of us, to snuff us out like we're nothing. But we will not give them a fight. We will not give them what they want. We will surrender."

The murmurs started immediately, a ripple of disbelief spreading through the crowd like a wave crashing against the shore. Ramsey raised a hand to silence them, his voice softening but never losing its command.

"I'm asking you for your loyalty," he said, his tone shifting, carrying an almost vulnerable edge. "Not because I demand it, but because I need it. We're not just fighting for survival anymore. We're fighting for what we'll become. And if we do this right, we'll be stronger than we've ever been."

The room grew quiet again, the weight of his words settling on the men like an unbearable burden. They seemed to understand, even if the sadness in their eyes betrayed their reluctance. Slowly, almost

reluctantly, they nodded, their trust in Ramsey palpable yet fragile, like a thin thread stretched to its limit.

Trust can be a fragile thing.

And then, breaking the heavy silence, came a voice—not from the crowd but from above.

"And would you surrender with them?"

The words dripped with venom, each syllable cutting through the air like a blade. Ramsey's head snapped upward, his heart skipping a beat as he searched for the source.

Standing at the top of the grand staircase was a ghost from his past. Javier.



The man Ramsey had trusted more than anyone in this world, the man he believed was dead, was looking down at him with piercing eyes that burned with accusation. A faint glow from the projector in his hand illuminated his features, making him seem almost spectral.

Ramsey blinked, his mind struggling to reconcile what he was seeing with the reality he knew. "Javier..." he breathed, barely audible.

Javier began descending the stairs, each step slow and deliberate, his expression a mixture of scorn and cold amusement.

"Or would you go back to your government buddies to receive a medal?" Javier's voice was steady, almost mocking, as he reached the base of the stairs and locked eyes with Ramsey.

The men in the room exchanged confused glances, the cracks in their trust now widening as doubt seeped into their ranks.

Ramsey stood frozen for a moment, his mind racing. He had rehearsed every possible scenario for tonight, every move, every countermove. But this—this was something he could have never foreseen.

"I thought you were dead..." Ramsey's voice faltered, barely above a whisper.

Javier descended the stairs slowly, deliberately, his footsteps echoing through the quiet. A faint glow from the projector in his

hand cast flickering shadows across his face, making him seem almost otherworldly.

"Good thing, isn't it?" Javier said, his tone calm yet biting. "I came back from the dead. Or maybe..." He paused, his lips curling into a bitter smile. "I was never dead to begin with."

Ramsey took a step forward, his mind spinning. "Don't speak in riddles, Javier. Explain yourself."

Javier's eyes narrowed. "Keep your voice down, Ramsey. You're in no position to demand anything from me—not after everything."

Before Ramsey could respond, Javier raised the remote in his hand and pressed a button. A soft hum filled the air as a projector flickered to life, illuminating the wall on the second floor.

"Not after you played with all our trust."

The room tensed as a video began to play. Ramsey's face appeared on the screen, captured in various covert meetings. First, he was seen with Cheng, their conversation hushed but unmistakably strategic. Then, another clip—this time conspiring with Tiffany, their voices barely audible but their body language damning.

The video cut to Ramsey entering a warehouse late at night, speaking with Captain Davis, his tone unmistakably urgent. And then more: clandestine calls, shadowed exchanges, whispered

words to people no Heartland member would trust. Every secret meeting, every government tie laid bare for all to see.

Javier leaned closer, his voice low and deliberate. "When I woke up, I was in a hospital. Barely alive. I thought it was over for me, Ramsey. I thought the next thing I'd see would be the afterlife—if I even deserved one. But then he came."

"Who?"

"A man in a suit," Javier said, the words like venom. "Black as night, face shrouded in shadow. He moved like a ghost, soundless. I didn't even hear him enter the room." Javier paused, the memory washing over him. "I couldn't make out his face. He kept the lights dim, always stayed just out of view. But his voice..." Javier's eyes darkened. "It wasn't natural. It was deep, distorted—like it wasn't entirely human."

Ramsey's chest tightened, a knot forming in his stomach.

"He told me everything," Javier continued, his voice bitter. "About you. About your deals, your secrets, your lies. He showed me the proof, Ramsey. He laid it all out in front of me like a map of betrayal. And then he told me what I had to do."

Ramsey's throat felt dry. "And what was that?"

Javier's lips curled into a cold smile. "Wait. Watch. Strike when the time was right. He promised me that if I stayed hidden, if I stayed

patient, I'd get the chance to confront you. To expose you for the traitor you are."

Ramsey's voice was barely a whisper. "He kept you alive to do this?"

Javier nodded slowly. "And he didn't stop there. He made it look like I was gone—like I'd died on that operating table. Left a body double in my place, perfect down to the last detail. Even my family didn't know. He erased me, Ramsey. And I let him, because I needed to know the truth."

Ramsey's chest heaved as he processed the revelation. "Javier, I—"

"Don't," Javier interrupted, his voice icy. "You don't get to justify what you did. Not now. Not ever."

Ramsey's voice cracked with guilt. "I tried to get to you as fast as I could! I thought—"

"You weren't fast enough!" Javier's voice boomed, silencing the room. He took a step closer, his eyes blazing with fury. "You didn't save me because I wasn't part of your government allies. I was expendable. A loose end."

Ramsey's shoulders sagged under the weight of Javier's words. "I didn't know... I didn't think—"

"No, you didn't think," Javier spat. "And now we're here. You standing there with all your excuses, and me with the truth."

The room was suffocating, the tension palpable as the men around them exchanged uneasy glances.

The room erupted in murmurs. The men who had moments ago pledged their loyalty to Ramsey now looked at him with a mixture of betrayal and confusion.

Javier turned to face the crowd, his voice rising to command their attention. "You called him 'The Boss.' You followed him, trusted him. But the truth is, Ramsey was never ours. He was theirs."

He pointed to the frozen image on the screen, a still of Ramsey shaking hands with a government official. "A double agent. Here to dismantle the Heartland from within."

Javier's words landed like a thunderclap, reverberating through the room.

All eyes turned to Ramsey. Some filled with anger, others with disbelief, but all of them demanded the same thing: the truth.

Ramsey stood still, his face unreadable, his shoulders heavy with the weight of the moment. He didn't deny it. He didn't argue. His silence was louder than any confession.

Javier's voice lowered, cold and cutting. "What now, Ramsey? Will you surrender with them? Or were you planning to walk out of here to collect your medal?"

The air was thick with tension, every man in the room waiting for Ramsey to speak, to explain, to justify the unthinkable. But Ramsey didn't move, his eyes locked on Javier, the weight of his choices crashing down in the stillness.

Ramsey's voice was steady, though the weight of Javier's words sank deep into his chest. His gaze never wavered as he locked eyes with the man he once called brother.

"Yes... it is the truth," Ramsey admitted, his voice quieter now, tinged with regret. "But I never wanted to... "

The room was frozen in time, the heavy air thick with disbelief. Javier's expression remained unreadable, but his eyes gleamed with a knowing malice. His hands tightened around the remote in his grip, but he said nothing more for a moment.

Ramsey's breath was slow, measured. "But all these years... every time we had fun, all the laughter, and the joy... and yes, the sadness, they were real. All of it was true." He paused, the weight of his own words heavy on his tongue. "You think I didn't feel it? That I didn't care?"

Javier's lip curled into a thin, bitter smile. "And yet, you played both sides. You let us trust you, let us build our lives around you, only for it to come crashing down. All of it, a lie."

Ramsey's jaw tightened, but his eyes never left Javier's. "I never wanted to lie to you. Or to any of you. I did what I had to do to survive. To protect... *everything* we've built."

His gaze flickered briefly to the men gathered in the room—eyes wide with shock and disbelief—before returning to Javier. "But you don't understand. You *couldn't* understand. This isn't just about the mob. It's about something bigger. The stakes have always been higher than you ever knew."

Javier shook his head, the harsh light from the projector casting long shadows over his face. "No. You don't get to play the martyr here, Ramsey. You had choices. You had options. And you chose them all... over us."

Ramsey took a step forward, his hands clenched into fists at his sides, yet his voice remained calm, resolute. "Maybe I did, Javier. Maybe I did choose... but it was never about betrayal. It was about survival. For all of us. And now? Now I'm trying to fix it. To rebuild what we've lost."

Javier scoffed, the cold bitterness seeping through his words. "Rebuild? You think after everything, after *this*, there's a way back?" He gestured toward the stunned faces in the room. "They *trusted* you, Ramsey. And you—"

"I didn't have a choice!" Ramsey's voice cracked under the pressure, a flicker of desperation seeping through the cracks of his composure. "You think I didn't want to be here with you? With all of

you? But the moment I made a wrong move, you all were as good as dead. You think I could have walked away from this? Walked away from what they were going to do to all of us?"

The room shifted, the collective tension building, pulling the men toward a precipice, unsure of what to believe anymore. Javier's face remained cold, unmoved by Ramsey's plea.

"You're right," Javier's voice cut through the air like ice. "You didn't walk away, because it was never about *us* to you. It was about *you*."

Ramsey swallowed hard, feeling the walls closing in. He stepped back, his hands lifting in surrender. "Maybe it was, but not in the way you think. Every decision I made, every move I made, I did it for us to survive. Not for the government. Not for anyone else."

"But you failed." Javier's eyes gleamed with something darker. "And now you want us to believe it was all for us?"

Ramsey took a slow breath, his resolve solidifying. "Yes, Javier. I failed. But that doesn't mean I'm done trying." He let the words linger, his heart pounding in his chest. "I'm asking you, not as your enemy, but as the man who stood by you for so long. Come with me. Let's fix this. Together."

Javier's gaze softened for a fraction of a second—just enough for Ramsey to notice. But then, just as quickly, the mask returned. "You don't get to ask me that anymore. Not after everything."

Ramsey's shoulders sagged, but he didn't back down. "Then I'll fight for what's left," he said quietly, his voice steady once again. "But I won't abandon them. I won't abandon *us*."

Javier's eyes flashed with something unreadable, before his lips twisted into a smile—sharp and unforgiving. "Then we're both fools, Ramsey."

And with that, he turned away, the projector screen flickering off, leaving the room plunged into the darkness of uncertainty.

The tension in the room was suffocating, thick with the weight of betrayal. Ramsey's heart pounded in his chest as he faced Javier, the man who had been his brother, the one person who had stood by him through everything, now standing before him as a specter of vengeance.

Javier's lips curled into a grim smile as he leveled the gun at Ramsey, his fingers tightening around the cold steel. The gun gleamed in the dim light, its muzzle pointed squarely at Ramsey's chest.

"Fools that we were," Javier muttered, his voice low, almost a growl. "I think we don't have any time to waste. We both know how this ends."

The words hung in the air like an omen. Javier's hand began to move, slow and deliberate, towards the trigger.

Ramsey's breath caught in his throat. Time seemed to stretch, every heartbeat deafening in his ears. The world around him blurred, and for a fleeting moment, all he could see was the barrel of the gun. His mind raced. He had no more excuses, no more lies to offer.



Then, in an instant, everything shifted.

A gunshot cracked through the silence, sharp and sudden, the sound of it splitting the tension like a blade. But it didn't come from Javier's gun. It came from the side.

Javier's expression twisted into one of disbelief as his gun flew from his grip, the shot ringing out just inches from Ramsey's face. His fingers jerked in agony as he staggered back, his hand clutching the wound that now bled freely.

"Cheng!" Ramsey's voice barely registered in the chaos, but he didn't have time to focus on her.

Before Javier could react, Tiffany was on him. She moved like lightning, her arms wrapping around his, locking him down with practiced ease. Her grip was unrelenting as she twisted his body, forcing him to the ground in a matter of seconds. Javier, a man who once stood as one of the fiercest fighters Ramsey had ever known, was reduced to a struggling heap beneath Tiffany's strength.

Javier growled in frustration, but his limbs were bound—helpless against her precision.

As the mob members, still reeling from the shock of the betrayal, began to stir with anger, some rising to their feet, others shaking their heads in disbelief, a sudden flash of light filled the room. A burst of blinding white light made everyone squint, and for a split second, the world turned into a haze of color and afterimage.

When the light dimmed, there he stood, in the center of the room—a dark silhouette against the blinding glow. Mid-Nite.

His figure was an enigma, cloaked in darkness, moving with an eerie calm amidst the chaos. His black mask seemed to absorb the light around him, his presence cutting through the growing frenzy like a knife.



The room fell into stunned silence, the mob members frozen, their eyes wide with shock. No one dared to move. No one dared to speak.

Mid-Nite didn't flinch. He didn't even acknowledge the stunned crowd. His focus was on Ramsey and the captured Javier. His voice, when it came, was low and cutting, laced with authority.

"Enough," he said, his voice a calm command.

Every man in the room stood rigid, fear and confusion mixing in their veins as they processed the sudden turn of events. Javier, who had moments ago been the one to wield the power, was now a prisoner to both Tiffany's skill and Mid-Nite's sudden, chilling arrival.

Ramsey's pulse still raced, but his eyes never left Javier, who now lay on the floor, helpless, his face contorted in rage and disbelief.

The tension in the room hung thick, suffocating everything in its path. Javier's words were like knives, each one cutting deeper than the last, unraveling everything Ramsey had built. The men around him stood frozen, their faces a mix of shock, disbelief, and fear. But Ramsey, despite the turmoil swirling in his chest, stood still—silent, accepting.

Then, suddenly, a deafening explosion shattered the heavy atmosphere.

The ground trembled beneath Ramsey's feet, and the walls seemed to groan in protest. He instinctively tensed, his body bracing for the chaos he thought had come. His heart raced, and his eyes flicked toward the door, expecting the inevitable rush of police and military. A raid.

But there was nothing.

No shattering glass. No splintering wood. No sounds of boots storming through the halls. Only the distant echoes of something far worse.

Another blast.

Ramsey's chest tightened, his breath catching as the second explosion rippled through the air. The silence that followed felt more

ominous than the blasts themselves. His instincts screamed that something was wrong.

Then a third explosion, and this time Ramsey felt it—the full weight of it pressing against his chest. This wasn't the sound of chaos rushing toward him. It was something else. Something distant, but no less terrifying.

He turned toward the window, his eyes scanning the horizon. The mansion stood at the edge of the farmland, a place so remote that the nearest hint of civilization felt like an eternity away. The fields stretched out, endless and serene, yet in that moment, they felt suffocating.

And then he saw it.

In the distance, far beyond the fields, beyond the familiar skyline of Leeds, a dark silhouette began to rise. A cloud of smoke—thick, black, and billowing into the night sky—streaked across the horizon. The lights of the city were obscured by the inferno, as if the very heart of Leeds was being consumed by the flames.

Ramsey's throat tightened as he realized it. The city of Leeds.

Ramsey's blood ran cold as the realization hit him like a physical blow. The blasts that had rocked the mansion weren't just distant echoes—they were the sound of destruction, the sound of everything he had built crumbling into chaos. He tried to steady himself, but the tremors in his hands betrayed him.

The city of Leeds... everything he had known. His empire, his hard-fought control over every corner of this city—now all of it was being wiped away. His heart pounded as his thoughts collided in an avalanche of fear and disbelief.



Javier's laugh sliced through the air, dark and triumphant.

"Ha... Haha... you see, Ramsey," Javier's voice oozed with malevolent pleasure, "this is how it all ends. This is the reckoning for everything you've done."

Ramsey's gaze snapped back to Javier, disbelief clouding his vision.

"What have you done?!" His voice was raw, a primal shout of anger and desperation.

Javier's grin widened, his eyes gleaming with an almost mad satisfaction. "The impossible. Used every last scrap of power from the rival gangs to set up bombs all over this city. It's all gone, Ramsey. Every building, every street, every corner where you thought you were safe—now, it's burning. Just like you burned all of our lives."

Ramsey staggered back as if struck, his body refusing to comply with his mind's frantic command to act.

The city was crumbling. His city. The heart of everything he had worked for.

Another explosion shook the walls, a deafening roar that rattled the foundations of the mansion. Panic surged through Ramsey's chest, but there was nowhere to run.

He turned to the men in the room, their faces pale with terror. They, too, understood now—everything was lost.

But it wasn't just the city. Ramsey's eyes met Javier's, the realization dawning fully in that single look.

Javier wasn't just an enemy. Javier had never been an ally. He had played him, deceived him, manipulated him into the very situation he now faced.

"You..." Ramsey's voice faltered, but he gritted his teeth and forced the words out, "You... betrayed us all."

Another blast echoed from far away. A burst of flame lit up the night sky through the windows, reflecting in Javier's eyes, as though the fire of the city was the flame of his vengeance.

"Endgame, Ramsey. This is where the story ends," Javier whispered, his voice dangerously low. "And it's all your fault."

The world outside was burning. And inside, Ramsey's heart stopped as he realized the true weight of Javier's words. There was no escape. No redemption. Just flames.



In The Distant City

In The Distant City, there was the streak, a green blur cutting through the chaos, racing towards every corner of the city. Everywhere at once, the speed a shield, rescuing civilians, carrying them away from the impending disaster. The destruction was relentless, but the blur kept pushing forward, my heart racing as I weaved between falling debris and crumbling structures. Everything around me was a blur... Heh, in fact... I was the Blur... Or rather, I am *The Blur*.



Every pulse of my legs, every twist of my body, fueled by the hours of grueling training, made me faster, stronger, more precise than before. As I dashed from one rescue to the next, my mind barely kept up with the frenetic pace.

And then, above the madness, I saw him. My best friend, my comrade—*Immortal*. He was soaring through the air, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, his every jump shaking the very foundations of the city. There was nothing in this world that could kill him. But as I watched him in action, something shifted within me—a cold, gnawing feeling.



We were the last line of defense. If we fell, this city would fall but what caused all this. But in that moment, I couldn't shake the growing sense of dread in my gut. What if it wasn't just the disaster we were facing? What if *something* else was out there—something even more dangerous than what we had prepared for?

I blinked, and for a split second, the air grew still. It was like time itself was holding its breath. I could feel it—something was coming. Something worse than the destruction.

Immortal paused mid-leap, his eyes scanning the horizon. We both sensed it—the same thing, but neither of us could articulate it.

The city shuddered again. This time, the air crackled with an ominous energy. "Do you feel that?" I asked, my voice steady despite the unease gnawing at my insides.

Immortal didn't answer. He was already moving, his powerful legs propelling him to higher ground. But I stayed frozen, my instincts screaming at me to look... to see something that wasn't quite right.

In the distance, a figure cloaked in shadow moved across the docks, its outline barely visible against the night. It wasn't human. **It Was Khan.**

"Immortal..." I muttered under my breath.

And in that moment, our story—our battle—was just beginning.

